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Hill report casts doubts on story of Contra plot on U.S. embassy

By James Morrison
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has distributed a report to committee members containing allegations that two informants received money or were encouraged to falsely link Nicaragua's anti-communist resistance and many American supporters to a plot to blow up an American embassy.

The report, distributed by Indiana Republican Richard Lugar and dated June 26, is based on State Department cables from the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica describing interviews with a British, a French and two American "mercenaries" while they were imprisoned there on weapons charges.

The report says that one of the Americans, Steven Carr, appears to be a source of information about a reported plot to blow up the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica in 1985 and blame it on Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista government.

The report also states that Carr's cellmate, Englishman Peter Glibbery, has alleged that Mr. Carr accepted money from Martha Honey, a free-lance journalist in Costa Rica " 'to provide her with a controversial story.' "

The first mention of the alleged embassy plot, the report states, "appears to be in a July 1985 article by Martha Honey."

Ms. Honey and her husband, Tony Avirgan, also a free-lance journalist, co-authored a book which contains broad-based allegations of illegal activities by the anti-Sandinista resistance and many rebel supporters.

The couple also has filed a $23.8 million lawsuit against 30 defendants, including the military leader of the Nicaraguan resistance, anti-Casto Cuban exiles and American supporters.

The suit alleges that the defendants were part of a conspiracy involving gun and drug smuggling, the attempted assassination of a rival rebel leader, the embassy plot, a plan to kill U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica Lewis Tambs, and the murder of an informant who first revealed the alleged conspiracy.

The allegations have fueled the political debate in Congress over financial aid to the resistance. Sen. John F. Kerry, Massachusetts Democrat, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has been a leading opponent of the administration's efforts and has called for open hearings into the conspiracy allegations.

Sen. Lugar's report, titled, "Information on Allegations of Wrongdoing by Contras and Their American Supporters," was prepared partly in response to Mr. Kerry's request for the hearing.

The report states that American Robert Thompson and Frenchman Claude Chaffard, two of the "mercenaries" arrested with Carr, "have reported that Carr took money from her [Ms. Honey] to make false statements. Carr himself told U.S. officials earlier this year that Honey has tried to get him to admit participation in various crimes of which he had no knowledge."

Mr. Avirgan, reached by telephone in Costa Rica, refused to discuss the allegations raised in the report and accused The Washington Times of waging a campaign against him and his wife.

"We're happy to cooperate with journalists," he said. "What The Washington Times is engaged in is not journalism. You're engaged in a hostile campaign against us. It's disgraceful, and it's not journalism. I don't want to cooperate in any way with The Washington Times."

Ms. Honey was not available for comment. Mr. Glibbery's whereabouts could not be determined.

Carr is serving a nine-month jail sentence in Naples, Fla., for violating probation on a 1984 conviction for forgery and grand theft, according to the Florida state attorney's office. Carr, in a telephone interview, declined to discuss the allegations and referred a reporter to his attorney.

The attorney declined to allow Carr to be interviewed.

The report questions the validity of an account of the embassy plot given by a Cuban-American, Jesus Garcia, who the report describes as a "convicted felon awaiting sentencing in Miami on gun charges."

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"Garcia has repeated his charges ... to a number of people. He has taken a polygraph examination. He was asked about the existence of an assassination plot; his answer was deemed inconclusive. On a related question, his answer was deemed deceptive," the report said.

"The legal aid attorney who represented Garcia at his trial has said that Garcia never mentioned the plot until after a meeting Garcia had with Martha Honey," the report said.

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In addition to the Lugar report, The Times has obtained the State Department cables upon which the report was based and which describe the embassy interviews. The Times also has obtained another State Department cable based on an FBI interview with the four "mercenaries" in Costa Rica and copies of letters written by three of them that appear to support what they told the embassy officials.

Carr, in a Jan. 31 letter, said, "Martha Honey can bite my ... If need be I can still destroy her and prove we were fed information and bribed, in a small way."

The letters were written to John Hull, an American farmer and rancher who lives in Costa Rica, supports the rebels and allows them to use his air strips to evacuate their wounded. Mr. Hull, in an telephone interview from Costa Rica, confirmed that the received the letters and said he believed they were written by the three "mercenaries."

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The journalists, in their suit, accused Mr. Hull of being one of the primary conspirators, but he has denied all of their charges in press interviews.

Mr. Glibbery wrote in a February letter to Mr. Hull that Mr. Avirgan tried to get him and Carr to testify at Mr. Garcia's trial about the alleged conspiracy.

"Avirgan offered Steve Carr immunity from prosecution (on behalf of the FBI so he says) if Steve was to testify on Garcia's behalf. When Steve laughed this off, Avirgan made the same offer to myself saying, 'You had better think seriously about this because the FBI is going to indict you all in the next three weeks,' " Mr. Glibbery wrote.

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He also wrote Mr. Hull, "I give you my word I will not make any more statements which may harm you or the organization."

A cable to the State Department filed after a U.S. embassy official interviewed Mr. Thompson said the adventurer claimed that, "Carr has continually lied about events leading to their arrests and mentioned that both he and Chaffard had witnessed Carr accepting money from reporter Martha Honey to, he alleges, make false statements."

Mr. Thompson in a March 29 letter said that Carr and Mr. Glibbery were giving regular press interviews to other reporters.

"They stop by my [cell] window frequently on their journeys to and from their meetings," he wrote. "Their current story is that they now say that all their previous declarations were deliberate lies."

An April cable from the director of the FBI to the CIA, State Department and Secret Service, Customs and Immigration authorities described an FBI interview with the four adventurers.

"They all adamantly denied knowledge regarding plots to assassinate U.S. Ambassador Lewis Tambs or destroy the United States Embassy in Costa Rica. They all stated the first they heard about such plots was in early 1985 from reporters Martha Honey and Tony Avirgan," the cable said.

Mr. Avirgan and Ms. Honey have pursued their conspiracy theory for about two years in an attempt to prove that the Central Intelligence Agency, anti-Sandinista fund-raisers in the United States and exiled anti-Castro Cubans plotted a May 30, 1984, assassination attempt against a rival guerrilla leader, Eden Pastora.

They maintain that the alleged conspirators planted a bomb in Mr. Pastora's Nicaraguan rebel camp, La Penca, during a press conference to kill Mr. Pastora because he refused to cooperate with a larger guerrilla group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN), to open a coordinated resistance in southern Nicaragua.

The bomb killed eight people. An additional 38 others were injured, including Mr. Pastora and Mr. Avirgan.

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